

Paxson, Historical Opportunity in Colorado

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THE HISTORICAL OPPORTUNITY IN COLORADO

By FREDERIC L. PAXSON

There is great danger lest the teacher of history in the far West should bewail the thousand odd miles that separate him from the source material of his profession, and so overlook the opportunity that lies at his feet. He is too liable to forget that the parallel to the course of his own country has rarely, if ever, been seen; that the external facts of the history of the West show to the thoughtful worker a field of amazing richness, and that the internal facts, so far as they have been exploited, confirm the first impression. The chance to investigate the workings of a civilization which in less than half a century has passed from wilderness through frontier and pioneer conditions to order and wealth is what he ought to see before him. And the opportunity to work out the causes and results in this concentrated life is his historical opportunity.

It is useless for the student of history in Colorado to mourn over the absence of great libraries. He may as well admit the fact that the historical library is a product of generations, and that, save for two or three working collections of various degrees of incompleteness, such a library is not within his reach. If he be a worker in any field of general history, be it European, mediæval, ancient, or even American, he must be content with a few secondary authorities. He cannot hope, even with access to all the libraries in the state, to produce a piece of original work that will add anything to the knowledge of the world. But if he admit this fact, and settle down to the belief that no productive work in history can be done in Colorado, he will overlook in the local field a historical opportunity that is hardly to be equaled in the United States.

The beginnings have been made in the writing of the history of Colorado, but the journalists have thus far monopolized the work, and it is only today that the trained historical scholar is coming to weigh the evidence and record a critical judgment. A small number of general works must be considered by anyone who undertakes to study the

history of the state; the production of monographs has begun, and new studies are appearing in increasing number; while the collection of the raw material for future studies is fairly well advanced.

The histories of Colorado begin with Hollister's handbook for miners,¹ published in the sixties and containing a brief sketch of the growth of the territory. Most of them have followed this work, accepting its conclusions and giving to it more or less credit. Fossett,² in his work of a decade later, is much indebted to his predecessor; and the monumental work of General Hall³ is based upon the foundation of Hollister, supplemented by a knowledge of newspapers and the copious memory of one who was more than a spectator in the early days of the territory. The pages of Bancroft⁴ on the state show a knowledge of the same source, while those of Byers⁵ show the same indebtedness, reinforced by the memory of an active pioneer.

In a less general sense, Hollister is still used as a source, but the local antiquarians have provided much material for the future historian. Such books as those published by Baskin & Company of Chicago⁶ for the subscription trade are by no means to be disregarded. Boyd's *History of Greeley*⁷ is rich in documents and economic details. The biographical subscription works⁸ record personal details for many a valuable footnote. And Smiley's *History of Denver*⁹ is a conscientious attempt to tell the story that has had a large measure of success. It is the best of the works in print on the history of Colorado.

¹ OVANDO J. HOLLISTER, *The Mines of Colorado* (Springfield, Mass., 1867).

² FRANK FOSSETT, *Colorado: A Historical, Descriptive, and Statistical Work on the Rocky Mountain Gold and Silver Mining Region* (Denver: Daily Tribune Steam Printing House, 1876).

³ FRANK HALL, *History of the State of Colorado* (4 vols., illustrated; Chicago, 1889).

⁴ HUBERT HOWE BANCROFT, *History of Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming, 1540-1888* (San Francisco' 1890; Vol. XXV of his *Works*).

⁵ WILLIAM N. BYERS, "History of Colorado," in *Encyclopedia of Biography of Colorado*, Vol. I (Chicago: The Century Publishing and Engraving Company, 1901).

⁶ *History of the City of Denver, Arapahoe County, and Colorado* (Chicago, 1890); *History of Clear Creek and Boulder Valleys, Colorado* (Chicago, 1890); *History of the Arkansas Valley, Colorado* (Chicago, 1891).

⁷ DAVID BOYD, *A History of Greeley and the Union Colony of Colorado* (Greeley, Colo., 1890).

⁸ See the *Encyclopedia of Biography*, noted above, and *Portrait and Biographical Record of Denver and Vicinity, Colorado, Containing Portraits and Biographies of Many Well Known Citizens of the Past and Present, Together with Biographies and Portraits of All the Presidents of the United States* (Chicago, Chapman Pub. Co., 1898).

⁹ JEROME C. SMILEY, *History of Denver, with Outlines of the Earlier History of the Rocky Mountain Country* (Denver, 1901).

It may be said that the outlines of the history of the State have been defined in a superficial way, and that personal recollection, strengthened by an uncritical use of newspapers, has done as much as can be expected of it. The next step, which is the production of critical monographs on details of the history, is now being taken. The learned institutions of the state are showing a consciousness of their duty in respect to the local problem,¹ while the neighboring states that once embraced the territory of Colorado are aiding in the work,² and individuals within the state are doing something in the way of publication of personal reminiscences.³

As a means for aiding this production of monograph literature, the gathering of source material has not only been begun, but has resulted in at least two valuable collections of Coloradoana. The sources for the history of Colorado are to be found in several different classes, none of which may be neglected by the student. The documents of the state, which form the foundation for the legal portion of the history, include the printed statutes, journals and reports of both state and territorial periods, and the great mass of unpublished manuscript records which are to be found in the archives of the Capitol and the counties.⁴ The statutes, documents and debates of Congress also throw much light on special phases of Colorado history. In the matter of non-official sources, the newspapers lead the way, subject always to the limitations upon material of this sort. The mistakes of both head and heart which abound in the daily press do not destroy its source value, but certainly do impose upon the student the necessity for more care and higher degrees of criticism than do any other of our modern sources. Personal recollections, biographies and other private works add greatly to the source material at the disposal of the scholar.

¹ ELMER H. MEYER (of the University of Denver), "The Constitution of Colorado," in *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, Vol. II, pp. 256-274; FREDERIC L. PAXSON (of the University of Colorado), "The Boundaries of Colorado," in *University of Colorado Studies*, Vol. II, pp. 87-94; B. M. RASTALÉ (of Colorado College), "The Cripple Creek Strike of 1893," in *Colorado College Studies, Social Science Series*, No. 5, June, 1905, pp. 1-48.

² HELEN G. GILL, "The Establishment of Counties in Kansas," in *Kansas Historical Collections*, Vol. VIII, pp. 1-23; W. J. SPILLMAN, "Adjustment of the Texas Boundary in 1850," in *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 177-195.

³ *Early Day Letters from Auraria (now Denver) Written by Libeus Barney to the Bennington Banner, Bennington, Vermont, 1859-1860* (n. d.).

⁴ F. L. PAXSON, "The Public Archives of the State of Colorado," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1903*, Vol. I, pp. 415-437.

The most notable collection of materials for the history of Colorado is to be found in the private library of the president of the State Historical and Natural History Society, Mr. Edward B. Morgan, of Denver. This collection is the result of a prolonged search for books and pamphlets written about Colorado, in Colorado or by Coloradans. Its bound volumes go above five hundred, while its pamphlets run into the thousands. The labors of Mr. Morgan are being supplemented today by those of Mr. W. C. Ferrill, curator of the same society. The files of newspapers and the bundles of photographs gathered by him and guarded in the vaults of the Capitol form a nucleus for a great historical library at some future day.

This much has been done toward the writing of the history of Colorado: the general outline has been sketched, a few minor points have been cleared up in careful monographs, and the gathering of source material is progressing as rapidly as public and private means will allow. But this is only the beginning of the work that calls today for more laborers than the state has ever provided. In whatever field the local historian may choose to work, he can find the ground practically unbroken and the opportunity complete. It makes no difference whether he choose to investigate workings of the institutions of the state and the general activities of its government, or the development of local county or municipal institutions, or the larger problems of transportation, irrigation or politics that connect the state with its neighbor commonwealths and the United States. In every direction he may advance with the assurance that his contribution to history will be limited only by his industry and ability. The historical opportunity of Colorado lies in this field.

The central government of Colorado tempts the historical worker because of its rapid extension, highly concentrated in point of time. A period of forty-five years covers the whole of Colorado history, and and in this period there has developed, out of the barren frontier that had been the Great American Desert, a modern commonwealth with its various political, economic and social activities. Growth that has occupied a century in older states has occurred here in a generation, while in many directions the growth has been almost unique. A high-

school system with 83 per cent. of its instructors college graduates calls loudly for a historical explanation. A universal application of irrigation law gives a distinctive color and emphasis to legal history; while the relation of a state government to the control of mines can be studied here in all its aspects.

The field of local institutional history has never been worked to its extreme capacity in the United States. Much has been done in the far East, but even there the study has been fragmentary, and has been embarrassed in many cases by the historical remoteness of the origins. Throughout the West in general this remoteness does not exist. In Colorado it is still possible to supplement the documentary evidence as to historical beginnings with the recollection of historical participants. And the fact that the growth has been unduly rapid gives an unusual degree of continuity to the institutions. There is not a town or community in Colorado but has some economic or political reason for its existence and needs its careful historian. The mine and the watershed are still to be measured and estimated in their influences upon place and form of social life.

Transportation is perhaps the most significant element in the history of the West. It not only constitutes a large part of the cost of every commodity in use, but it possesses the power to build up or to destroy whole communities. Yet no one has written adequate histories of the wagon routes from the Missouri to the Rockies which made Colorado possible; no one has exhausted the subject of Federal policy towards continental railroads and public lands;^{*} no one has even broken the ground in the development of transportation by road, trail, steam and electricity within the state. All these fields are crying for some one to exploit them.

The opportunity thus opening in Colorado makes it possible for every student of American history to do something in the field of historical research. Every topic that he works out strengthens himself, and every article or note that he prints makes smoother the path of his colleagues. Whether he work in connection with a great educational

^{*} Two of the *Bulletins of the University of Wisconsin* reveal the possibilities in this general field. JOHN BELL SANBORN, "Congressional Grants of Land in Aid of Railways," *Bulletin No. 30* (Madison, 1899); JOSEPH SCHAFER, "The Origin of the System of Land Grants for Education," *Bulletin No. 63* (Madison, 1902)

institution, or in a local school, or in the privacy of his own study, the opportunity is the same. It is the chance to write a history that is yet fresh from the making and that presents its materials close to every hand.

Particularly in the case of the local schools is the opportunity attractive. For the senior year in the high school the ideal course in history is based on American history and civil government. It is thus possible, in the case of that majority of students whose scholastic education is now in its completion, to fill the mind with the actualities of local life. The mayor and the alderman possess a new interest when the student applies his theory of civics to the workings of his town. And if he thus realize the difference between the theory and practice, he is made thereby the better citizen. The basis of American history is more clearly understood if he identify some of its conditions as they have appeared in the making of his own community. And, fresh from this last year of the high school, he is thrown out into his later world with history and politics as real things, not as shadowy phantoms. From a practical standpoint of public morality, no man who has once learned to look historically upon his local government is likely to place himself in an embarrassing historical attitude. The judgment of the daily press is commonly personal or political—mistaken in either case—but the estimate of history must, in the long run of events, be right.

The student, the teacher, and the man in the street are only just beginning to appreciate the significance of the historical position of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain region. "Here,"¹ writes one of the workers, "is the virgin soil almost untouched by the student or the historian. Here, too, it is possible to study the frontier at close range, and to carry out for states and sections that magnificent line of research work which Professor Turner of Wisconsin and others are doing so admirably for the country as a whole."

¹ PROFESSOR THOMAS K. URDAHL, in "Introduction" to RASTALL, *Cripple Creek Strike of 1893*, p. iii.

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